


[HOME](#)
[WHO WE ARE ▾](#)
[NEWS AND EVENTS ▾](#)
[GIVING ▾](#)
[CHURCH GOVERNANCE ▾](#)
[VITALITY AND GROWTH ▾](#)
[CONTACT US ▾](#)

ICM Reflections – Leaving the Light On

Since my last ICM reflections I've visited eleven of the churches in our Conference, and as I look back on this past month one particular attribute stands out that is common to all of them – the light that shines out if you will. Our churches are notably diverse in size, make up, and worship style but all of them share the reality that they are gatherings of open minded people who are hospitable and who live out a growing theme in the United Church of Christ: Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!

Many religious writers have been commenting about the decline of the mainline church and the nature of the emerging church, and while I don't claim to know where all of this change will lead us I feel certain that the church of the future will include elements of what I have recently experienced here in the SECUCC:



Rev. Rodney & Angela Franklin

- First Congregational UCC, Birmingham, AL: “First” churches in the South tend to share the history of having been founded by the American Missionary Association (AMA) after the Civil War, and that history remains the glue that gives life to the congregation ... along with the history of strong leadership in the battle for Civil Rights in the 1960’s and ever since.



Beloved Community UCC

- Beloved Community UCC, Birmingham: a new church start with initial ties to First Congregational Church. A new church that has evolved into a multi-racial congregation with a strong sense of mission and a unique music ministry – four musicians who appeared more than a few times on MoTown.



Pastor Johnson and Randy at Tougaloo College

- Union UCC, Tougaloo, MS: The historic chapel on a college campus founded by the AMA. The pulpit in this sanctuary has hosted many notable preachers, including Martin Luther King, Jr.



Amber and Pam at Safe Harbor Family Church

- Safe Harbor Family Church, Flowood, MS: A strong, independent, inclusive congregation that began with a group of twelve people in 1995 that has since grown to nearly 300 who in 2010 joined SECUCC.

The Sr. Minister who has shepherded them throughout this journey has been Pam Walsh. Pam will be retiring at the end of this year, and Amber Kirkendoll, a newly licensed pastor working toward ordination through PATHWAYS, will succeed Pam. Future plans include building their first worship center large enough to hold their regular services, and their community events.



Four Members at First Congregational in Marion

- First Congregational UCC, Marion, AL: Another church with an AMA history (and direct ties to Andrew Young and his family). There are four remaining active members, and all four of them were present when I visited to talk with them about their future. They still want “to keep the light on!”
- Community Congregational, Montgomery, AL: A church with ties to First Congregational UCC of Montgomery and thus with AMA history. Community is currently searching for a new pastor and has hopes for new growth in the days to come.
- Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Chattanooga, TN: A few years back Pilgrim called David Brown to serve as their pastor. David indicated that this would be his last parish, with retirement ahead ... but Pilgrim has been growing in numbers, including young families, as it stands out in Chattanooga as an open and affirming community. David is having such a good time serving Pilgrim that I’m guessing he will wait a bit longer for that retirement!



Worship at the Holy Trinity dedication

- Holy Trinity Community Church, Nashville, TN: I've mentioned Holy Trinity before and on this occasion I enjoyed the dedication of their new sanctuary. There were 580+ people present for a spirited worship service and dedication of this 1.9 million dollar addition to their property – a remarkable story of growth to about 600 members that began with Pastor Cindy meeting with 12 “disciples” just 17 years ago!
- Church of the Savior, Roswell, GA: A former Baptist church that has joined SECUCC and is about to embark on several new steps. After selling their former church building they have been meeting in a motel while searching for new property to build a new building ... and while searching for a new pastor. When these searches have been completed new growth is expected – they will move from leaving the light on in a motel to shining it brightly in a new home!
- Pleasant Hill Community Church, Pleasant Hill, TN: I met with the search committee to begin the process of a search for a new called pastor. Final steps on their massive renovation have just been completed and numerous updates have been underway both in the church and in the Uplands Retirement Community. So this historic, mission-minded community is now ready for a new day.



Dr. Stephanie M. Crumpton's ordination



Participants at the ordination, including preacher Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.

- Rush Memorial Congregational UCC, Atlanta, GA: Last month featured a full story on Rush Memorial. The thing to add at this time is that it was the site for the ordination of Dr. Stephanie Crumpton – an ordination that featured stirring musical numbers and a special address by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.
- Victory Church, Stone Mountain, GA: And last but not least a visit to our largest congregation which began in 1987 in another motel with a small band of followers together with founding (and current) Pastor Kenneth Samuels. From that beginning just 26 years ago the church has grown to a large congregation seated on 25 acres in Stone Mountain. As their website proclaims: Victory Church has developed a broad range of ministries that serve and empower the congregation and community. Those

ministries include comprehensive Counseling Services, After School Tutoring, GED Classes, Athletic Leagues, Youth Mentoring Programs, a Food & Clothing Bank, a Business Connection & Finance Ministry, Victory Summer Camp, free HIV-AIDS Testing and Care, and a host of other services. Victory Church retains its original Baptist ties along with now being affiliated with SECUCC as well.

- Plus an independent Baptist Church in Southern Georgia that is considering affiliating with the Southeast Conference. This group is multi-racial and welcoming – attributes that fit well with SECUCC!

So a total of 13 visits with a fascinating variety of religious experiences. May it be enough to inspire you to keep your light shining, have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! – Randy Hyvonen

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